

On the glass chain gang



Making art: Jim Dennison and Leanne Williams in their Martinborough workshop. Photos: ROBERT KITCHIN

A father's love of birds has shaped a Wairarapa couple's glass art, writes **Ann Packer**.



STARLINGS nest in the eaves of the Martinborough workshop of Leanne Williams and Jim Dennison. They perch on the ridgeline, oblivious to the more colourful avian specimens inside the purpose-built corrugated-iron shed, where the cast glass artists are putting the finishing touches to work destined for the Brick Bay sculpture trail in Matakana.

Forty multicoloured glass parrots – some with pirate hats, others with James Cook’s head – and other exotic species will roost on top of a pergola on the two-kilometre trail north of Auckland, contrasting with half a dozen glass native birds huddling together on the grass-covered roof of an old long drop.

Called *The Plunderers*, the work is a reference to the zeal of the European pioneers in hunting to extinction native birds such as the huia.

Williams and Dennison, winners of this year’s Molly Morpeth Canaday 3D award, work together as the Crystal Chain Gang – a label that evolved about the time of the 2005 Dunedin Glass Invitational exhibition, for which they created a trio of sheep carcasses in glass, decorated with hundreds of glass roses. *Hung, Drawn and Slaughtered* later toured nationally.

Phillip Clarke, of Auckland’s Objectspace, the judge for this year’s MMC award, described their birds’ tails chandelier *Quill* as a beautiful and extravagant object that refers directly to glass history, while being utterly contemporary.

“Not only is it just beautiful to look at,” said the director of the Ponsonby gallery dedicated to innovative craft and design, “but it has a point to make about showiness and conspicuousness in relation to hunting and collecting.”

The couple’s first chandelier, adorned with upside-down birds, was made for an exhibition of the light fittings at Objectspace in 2006. Called *RIP*, Crystal Chain Gang’s response to the infamous birdman Sir Walter Buller



i Crystal Chain Gang’s work can be seen at Anna Bibby Gallery in Auckland and Avid in Wellington. They are part of a group exhibition, *Looking Glass: Reflecting Ideas*, at the Sarjeant Gallery, Whanganui. See crystalchaingang.co.nz

Chandeliers made since hang in Cuckoo cafe in Greytown and private homes in Khandallah and Herne Bay.

Cast glass has a long history, dating back to the Bronze Age (3000BC), but it fell out of favour when glassblowing developed about 50BC.

It was revived in the 1800s, when houses such as Lalique perfected the process.

New Zealand cast glass pioneer Ann Robinson revived the practice here in the 1980s, adapting the lost wax process used by bronze casters.

She later co-operated in the development of a source of 45 per cent lead crystal that is now exported around the world.

Gaffer glass (the word “gaffer” is another name for a glassblower) comes in the form of billets – oval bricks of shining glass like oversized lollies – and frit, the crumbs left over from making billets.

“Glass artists the world over

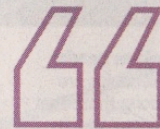
“The Americans make clear and coloured glass, but they love our palette.”

The cast glass process is long and slow. The models are fashioned from brown wax, which is then encased in silica and plaster. The wax is melted out, leaving a negative mould for the glass to melt into.

More recently, Dennison has developed a metal mould to shape the bird wings used in the chandelier.

As the moulds are slowly heated in the kiln to 820 degrees Celsius, the glass melts into every crevice – taking about three hours – then it must be cooled over a period of several days before finishing by hand. Only one parrot at a time fits into the kiln – or six lorikeets or 20 budgies.

Why birds? “By osmosis really,” Dennison says.



Glass artists the world over purchase New Zealand glass. JIM DENNISON



Stellar cast: Cast glass pieces begin with models, made of brown wax, which are encased in silica and plaster, above. **Glass beauty:** One of Leanne Williams’ and Jim Dennison’s contemporary chandeliers, left. These fittings have been described as beautiful and extravagant objects.

“Dad was a mad-keen bird person, and as kids we were like his little slaves. He would go into hides to photograph them.”

“My older brother was into photography too, but I was into building things, so I’d build the hides. Mum sewed up the camouflage drill.”

The couple, who met in Melbourne in 1985, went to Whanganui to train at what has since become UCOL (Universal College of Learning). He did a diploma in glass and she in fine arts, but it was only after a period of working in icing that Williams, who also taught in the fashion department, turned to the more enduring medium.

To begin with, they were surprised to find themselves collaborating on their art, but now work comfortably together. They moved to Martinborough from Whanganui in 2003 to be closer to family and to raise son Willie, now seven.

In 2007, the couple used a Creative New Zealand grant to take up a Creative Glass Centre of America fellowship at Wheaton, New Jersey, one of the earliest glass settlements in the United States.

Williams documented their “glass extravaganza” for *Art News* magazine last year.

This year, a Fulbright New Zealand grant assisted by Creative New Zealand allowed them to attend the American Glass Conference 2009 at Corning, New York, the home of Corning Ware, which has a glass museum and what Dennison